

INNOVATIVE PRACTICES IN STATE DOT WORKFORCE MANAGEMENT

EMPLOYEE RETENTION

Workplace Respect Project: Changing a Work Culture

The Maine Department of Transportation (MDOT) was concerned about the number and nature of complaints and grievances related to co-worker behavior and low levels of respect in the workplace. Training addressed some areas, but the Department felt that too many complaints of too serious a nature were getting too high up into MDOT. The Department contracted with a mediation firm, which through surveys, interventions, and facilitation, developed and conducted a pilot program to help managers, supervisors, and work crews “draw the line” on unacceptable workplace behavior. At the end of the pilot, each Division work crew identified its unique norms and behaviors. Each crew also wrote a “crew credo,” which all members signed. The framed credos hang in each Division crew location, and members often cite the credos when orienting new employees or addressing internal disputes. More importantly, co-worker behavior is improving.

The Maine Department of Transportation (MDOT) uses seven Maintenance Divisions (comparable to other state DOT districts) to manage the work of the Bureau of Maintenance & Operations (M&O). Within each division of 200 to 300 employees, crews of 7 to 15 workers are assigned to their own work lot or garage. Because of the large geographic area, the crews can be isolated from each other. The road crews repair and maintain roads and bridges, and these employees operate dangerous machinery and do hard and sometimes dangerous work in all types of weather. Worker safety is a primary value with the Department, but some complaints involved situations where an employee’s safety was put at risk, either through practical joking or horseplay that can cause injury or provoke claims of harassment.

The MDOT Office of Human Resources responds to grievances related to co-worker complaints. “Our concern,” says Jane Gilbert, MDOT Human Resources Director, “was increased frequency of complaints of harassment of co-workers. Some complaints involved employees of different genders, but the majority didn’t concern sexual harassment. They were about the need for a respectful, appropriate work environment. People were simply treating each other badly.”

Co-worker conflict and sexual harassment are not new concerns, and the MDOT Human Resources Training Office offers classes to address some of these situations, including gender harassment, managing conflict, stress management, and diversity issues. In early 1998, however, training and HR officials agreed that training had improved the situation, but that training offered only a limited solution. Marc Guimont, Director of the Bureau of Maintenance and Operations, reached the same conclusion independently. MDOT needed a fresh approach, and officials decided they needed outside help to develop it.

A Problem Statement Without Answers

MDOT turned to Augusta-based Mediation and Facilitation Resources (M&FR), a small firm that helps organizations resolve conflict issues and improve decision-making processes. The Department felt that someone ‘neutral’ should lead the project, that it



shouldn't be perceived as a project with a DOT label.

Jacqui Clark is a partner with M&FR. "It's ironic," she says, "that the human resources director who deals with employee grievances, and the head of M&O who manages maintenance workers called me the same week. Clearly, the Department knew it had problem with workplace respect and was serious about finding a solution to it."

MDOT officials saw the problem as too many complaints of too serious a nature are being brought through the complaint system to a point where central administration is required for intervention.

In one of the initial meetings to discuss the project, Jacqui Clark challenged the group to define what was too many. What is too serious? Given the conditions of crews working on the roads, what type of behavior is defined as 'going too far'? "We found we had a problem statement with no answers," she observes, "and our challenge was to define a process to get those answers."

Micro-cultures establish their own values and norms—behavior overlooked in one crew might not be tolerated in another. Whatever action the committee pursued, members realized that norms and values change from within, not externally. Ultimately, answers had to be within the crews themselves.

To begin the process, MDOT formed a formal steering committee including the Director of Human Resources, the Director of the Bureau of Maintenance and Operations,

the Director of Training, MDOT Personnel Specialist Ron Towle, and the consultant. The purpose was to design a multi-stage process to be guided by managers and employees at various organizational levels. The committee identified two guiding assumptions:

- Changes in social norms would be generated from within.
- Each interaction, including planning and data gathering, would directly promote the goal of improving workplace respect.

Drawing the Line

The steering committee selected one MDOT Division to serve as a pilot for the effort. They chose Division 3, which is geographically central and accessible to the committee. Division 3 had reported incidences of workplace complaints, and its managers were open to a change process.

The consultant first met with Division 3 managers to facilitate an analysis of the Division's workplace culture. Jacqui Clark had the same conversation with this group as she did with MDOT officials, inviting them to characterize what were too many complaints, what is too serious, and how they define 'going too far.'

Part of this process was a facilitation tool known as *draw the line*. The process provides small groups of four participants with approximately 30 pieces of paper, each with a word describing behaviors ranging from 'thank you' to 'sexual harassment.' Each group ranked the words

from least to most offensive behaviors. The groups then placed a line to show where their group/crew stops offensive behavior. Additional questions and lines were placed to indicate: Where do you wish the lines were drawn? Where does your supervisor draw the line? Where does MDOT draw the line?

An important part of the pilot project was to develop the language and certain aspects of the process to involve each micro-culture and make it a catalyst for change. Jacqui Clark also notes that it was important that all levels of the organization participate in the discussion, giving permission to carry the process and the conversation up or down one level. "We conducted brainstorming sessions at each level, but it's important that each group authorize us to take their insights and advice out of the circle," she notes.

The meeting with Division 3 managers resulted in agreement that the same exercises be conducted with the Highway Crew Supervisors (HSC), as well as highway crews. They felt the HCS would benefit directly from the conversation and that it was important for them to have input into the next project phase to improve workplace behavior.

Before meeting with the HCS, however, the steering committee developed a written cultural survey, which it distributed to each Division 3 employee. The survey posed questions such as:

- My co-workers and I get along well.
- Around here, people can disagree and discuss issues calmly.

- Practical jokes at work are acceptable to me.
- People who complain about trouble in the workplace are troublemakers.

Crew members completed the surveys privately and placed them into sealed envelopes by group to ensure anonymity, and returned them to MDOT central human resources office for tabulation.

Supervising in a Vacuum

Jacqui Clark met with the HCS, a group of 17 who supervised the smaller work crews. All were previously members of crews and some now supervised the crews in which they were once members. The first facilitated discussion revealed interesting information. For example, the HCS felt powerless to affect workplace culture.

Guy Baker, Division Engineer in Division 3, felt that everyone learned a lot in the process. “One of the most important things we heard was that crew supervisors felt isolated,” he says, “they didn’t feel they had a lot of support from their managers or from each other.”

Because of this disclosure, the steering committee recommended establishing peer groups of four or five supervisors as a way for the HCS to get to know each other. For the following year, the HCS met monthly for facilitated sessions to share ideas and concerns. Guy Baker believes that the most positive result of the process has been the increased peer support among supervisors. The HCS

also met quarterly with Jacqui Clark, and the Division engineer, without immediate supervisors present.

Another important indicator of the HCS commitment to resolving workplace conflict was that their crews should also be involved in the pilot process. Jacqui Clark notes that this commitment sent a powerful signal to their crew members that workplace respect, and their involvement in achieving it, was important

Taking It to the Crews

M&FR next began to facilitate meetings with every work crew at the Division 3 conference room. These two-hour sessions included the draw-the-line exercise and a group discussion. The discussion focused on two topics—how group norms get set or changed in the crew, and crew member recommendations for changing the norms to increase workplace respect.

According to Jane Gilbert, “This part of the project produced the most important results. It was the ‘aha’ experience where crew members realized that as individuals, they had a much lower level of tolerance for disrespectful behavior than did the crew as a unit. This is when crew members began asking, ‘If most of us want it better, what keeps us from changing?’ In a sense, it gave them permission to tackle their own issues and for us as managers to design a process to support them.”

The sessions also opened areas of communication among

crew members. Individuals told each other about behaviors they didn’t like. Comments like “I don’t like it when you call me _____,” or, “Didn’t you know that that _____ is a racist term?” would elicit responses of, “Hey man, I didn’t know that was disrespectful. I’m sorry.”

A Partnership Agreement

The next part of the communication loop involved the steering committee, the Division 3 managers, and the HCS. M&FR prepared a summary of project recommendation priorities, including HCS peer support groups, a partnering agreement between the Office of Human Resources and Division 3 management, a report to the crews and further data collection.

Part of the partnering agreement responds to the allegation that other administrators allowed unacceptable behavior to slip through the discipline system. The partnering agreement affirms the role assigned to each level of supervision and provides a periodic check point to identify and correct uses of the supervisory response system. To help explain the process, the steering group developed a workplace respect decision grid. As Jacqui Clark notes, “The grid helps individuals understand who has the authority in situations. It helps people recognize who implements, who asks, and who decides.”

The agreement also provides for a periodic check-in to identify correct and incorrect uses of the supervisory response system.

The automatic debriefing process does not require that a problem exist in order to discuss the partnering agreement.

Crew Credos

Perhaps the most dramatic change resulting from the workplace respect initiative is the crew credos. The credos are the result of a facilitated session in which the crew members wrote the norms and expectations for their crew behaviors (see sidebar). The credos are based on a prepared introductory paragraph, and each crew then created their own norm statements. The credos are signed and hang in each location.

According to Guy Baker, “Initially, I didn’t see the credos as being significant, but they have had quite an impact on how crew members treat each other. Supervisors tell me that often when there is a problem, one of the crew will take it off the wall and point out what members agreed to. Or someone will tell a new crew member ‘we don’t do that here.’ I find it amazing.”

It’s About Communication—And Time

MDOT completed the pilot session and the project has received positive responses from all who have been involved. The Highway Crew Supervisors Group and the Division Management both indicate that the work should continue and be taken to other Divisions, which the Department plans to do. The steering committee takes this as high praise from employees who essentially dislike meetings and who enjoy the satisfaction of

concrete and productive work.

The steering committee also conducted a second cultural survey to quantify what it was hearing anecdotally. Survey results did provide additional information and affirm initial reports. If there is a downside to the project, it is that it is a slow, labor-intensive process. The pilot took 24 months to complete. The steering committee believes that the timeline could be shortened to 12 to 18 months with a more predicted schedule. The Department realizes, however, that motivation to change behavior and norms comes from the members of each group.

“Getting individuals to talk about workplace respect is difficult,” says Jacqui Clark. “It is especially difficult in an organization essentially defined by its engineering expertise. Talking about how you ‘feel’ can be seen as frivolous. The pilot project helped us demonstrate that momentum for change builds with each intervention and at each organizational level.

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Sample Crew Credo

As members of the _____ crew, each of us plays an important role in the safety and well-being of our families, community members, and citizens of the State of Maine.

As workers with these responsibilities, we have the rights to:

- Trust that each crew member is doing a thorough job.
- Be trusted to do our jobs well.
- Have input on how things are done.
- Be told why things are done a certain way.
- Know work plans at least a day in advance.
- Be talked to as a crew and not as individuals regarding work plans.
- Be given clear and consistent directions.
- Be treated as knowledgeable adults.
- Be appreciated for good work.

To provide for these rights, and to meet our responsibilities, we promise, by signing below, to practice the following behaviors:

- To look out for each other’s safety and inform each other when they have done something that is unsafe.
- To assist each other with each other’s work load.
- To equally share job responsibilities.
- To come to work with a positive attitude.
- To appreciate each other.
- To tease and let each other know when it’s gone far enough (nothing to do damage).
- To read each other’s mood and act accordingly.